

Governor Phil Murphy

# TRANSCRIPT: December 8th, 2021 Coronavirus Briefing Media

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## Governor Murphy Holds COVID-19 Briefing



**Governor Phil Murphy:** Thank you, Michelle. Good afternoon, everybody, and thank you for being with us virtually today. I've just got to do one thing with my screen here. Bear with me a second. Hold on. There we go. Thanks for being with us virtually. I can't say the woman on my right because she's not on my right, but she is on the right of my screen, the woman on my right who needs no introduction, the Commissioner of the Department of Health, Judy Persichilli. Along with her today, we have the head of the Department of Health's – Department of Communicable Disease Service Medical Director, another familiar face, Dr. Ed Lifshitz. Great to have you back, Ed. Another guy who needs no introduction, Superintendent of the State Police, Colonel Pat Callahan. We have chief counsel, Parimal Garg and a cast of thousands.

First up today, this morning I signed an executive order for all flags to remain lowered in honor of the late Senator Bob Dole until sunset tomorrow. Senator Dole was an American hero, a member of our greatest generation. He so often reached across the aisle in politics to do what was right for our nation. He was a fiercely proud Republican, but he was an even prouder American. There's a lot to be learned from his example for all of us. I was speaking to Tom Daschle the other night, and he reminded me three huge landmark pieces of legislation. I won't go through the details, but he did them with respectively Tom Harkin, George McGovern, and Teddy Kennedy. A guy who put his country first, so God rest his soul.

Now let's move forward. Last Friday, we announced the first confirmed case of the Omicron variant in New Jersey, a Georgia resident who was traveling through New Jersey on a return from South Africa. We suspect that by now this is not the only case of Omicron in our state. I think Judy will go through the fact we've got at least a handful of others that are pending – either being sequenced or pending sequencing, and as



researchers continue to look more deeply under the so-called Omicron hood, there is still much we still do not know conclusively regarding its transmissibility, virulence, or the impacts of the vaccine. We are hearing more and more anecdotally about each of these factors, but we all need to be patient and let science give us definitive answers. This morning we did receive encouraging news with the release of a study conducted by Pfizer, which suggests that a booster dose of its vaccine provides similar levels of antibodies to combat Omicron as the initial two-shot regimen showed against the prior strains of the virus.

That is encouraging, without question, but in the meantime, our lived reality is that the Delta variant remains overwhelmingly – I would almost say near exclusively the variant of concern in New Jersey. We do know its transmissibility. We do know its virulence, and we do know that the vaccines are highly effective against it. As we bring up the latest vaccine numbers there you can see on the screen, we encourage everyone to continue seeking out opportunities to get your booster shots, and we're going to be opening up several more megasites in coordination with both Judy and her team and Pat and his team to help get these shots in arms as soon as possible. The last time we were together basically 10 days ago, I said the added protection of a booster is not a bonus, it's a necessity. That statement is even more true today, and the early data of the availability of the Pfizer vaccine in particular to enhance protection against Omicron bears this out.

One week from today – Judy, it's hard to believe we were standing shoulder to shoulder at University Hospital – will be the one-year anniversary of the first vaccinations against the coronavirus here in New Jersey. The best way we can celebrate this milestone is by getting our boosters and to help facilitate making it easier, Judy and her team are making next Wednesday Boost NJ day, and I know she'll have more on this in a few minutes. As we look to the overall performance of the vaccines, we see that they continue to perform exceptionally well in protecting vaccinated individuals against the infection, hospitalization, and death. This is now – remember, this is our entire lived history with the vaccines from January 19th through November 29, and I think even more relevantly, here are the preliminary numbers for the week of November 22nd to November 28. This is preliminary data, but it's important to get a real-time snapshot, which shows that even as some individuals' protection may have begun to wane – which is the reason, by the way, everyone needs to get a booster – the initial vaccination courses continue to perform very well.

Let's now go to the rest of today's data. Starting today, we're going to do things a little bit differently than we have for many of these briefings. Instead of the one-day numbers that we have been showing, we're going to give you week-long lookbacks for new cases, hospitalizations, and deaths, and so as we have moved back to the once a week briefings – and by the way, we'll be back with you live unless you hear otherwise this coming Monday, but as we've moved to the once a week briefings and frankly even before, the one-day snapshots we had been presenting lacked a lot of context. We're hopeful to better frame the data by showing them against the prior week so you can see the ebbs and flows as we have. We hope that this will not only put up these numbers in the proper perspective but also hammer home the reality that everybody needs to get vaccinated and then get boosted. We know the overwhelming majority of our new cases, new hospitalizations, and new deaths, sadly, are from among the unvaccinated.

As we turn now to the number of cases as you can see, it becomes quite obvious that we have experienced, as we expected and predicted, a post-Thanksgiving spike. There's no other way really to look at these numbers. The combination of colder weather, going indoors, and then layering on top of that a uniquely American holiday, we believe that combination is what's driving what we're seeing here. From these, we cannot let our guard down, especially if you're – if you aren't vaccinated and if you're in a crowd, whether it be in a store buying presents or in a bar or a restaurant or at a party, it is safest and wisest to mask up, especially if you do not know the vaccination status of those around you.

As would be expected from a surge in new cases, our hospitalizations – or hospitals, rather, are also seeing a surge in new COVID-related admissions. Surely, our numbers across the board are roughly one third of what they were a year ago at this time thanks to the vaccines, I might add, but keeping our healthcare system strong and capable of caring not just for COVID patients but everyone else who needs care remains a paramount concern. The burnout that our nurses and doctors and other staff members are experiencing after now what is basically 21 going on 22 months of the pandemic cannot be overlooked.

Next up, here are the newly confirmed with the heaviest of hearts I might add deaths going back since last Monday, and look at today in the context, again – the context of the past nine days. Moreover, sadly, it is very, very likely that most if not every one of these deaths or at least the majority of them could've been prevented

through vaccination. Now, as we always do, let's honor the lives of three more of those who we have lost. First up, we'll start by remembering Woodland Park's Phyllis Santonastaso. Phyllis spent 42 years as a registered nurse at St. Joseph's in Paterson and continued her career at an adult daycare center in Nutley and at a private practice before retiring, but even then she kept busy by volunteering at St. Joseph's where she was also a member of the Nurses' Alumni Association and volunteering with the Little Sisters of the Poor in Totowa.

She was predeceased by her first husband John in 2003 and her second husband Lawrence in 2016. She is remembered today by her children, Ann Marie, with whom I had the great honor of speaking last week, and Vincent and their spouses and families including grandchildren Alison, Amanda, James, and Leah along with many other relatives and friends, and by the way, James works at the Motor Vehicles Commission for the state of New Jersey. We thank Phyllis for a lifetime spent in service to others and may God bless her memory and the family she leaves behind.

Next up, we honor this gentleman, Eugene Fitzpatrick, a long-time resident of both Livingston and East Hanover. A retired database administrator for Foster Wheeler and then Novartis Pharmaceuticals, Gene played guitar, was a huge fan of the Rolling Stones. Excuse me. He loved summers on Long Beach Island and in the autumn was an avid, long-suffering Jets fan. He was also a Corvette buff and a proud member of North Jersey's Natural Glass Corvette Association. Gene was sadly predeceased by a son Michael to whom he was a devoted dad. In addition to his wife Cindy, with whom I had the great honor of speaking last week, he left Michael's mother Catherine, along with his daughter-in-law Heather, an incredible number of family and dear friends. We are honored to have called Gene a Jersey original and may God bless and watch over his memory and the family he leaves behind.

Finally today, we remember Mirba Vega, Mirba Vega. She was among the many Cuban refugees who sought to build a new life in Union City where she settled with her husband Antonio after the owner of the local bakery sponsored their passage to the United States and to New Jersey in the 1960s. While raising her and Antonio's five children, Mirba worked part-time as a cleaning lady. She would later drive a bus for the Hudson County Vocational Technical School. She was a renowned cook and was the heart of her family, a post she fully reclaimed after a bout with breast cancer. She left behind her husband of 57 years Antonio and their children Sandra, Alexis, Alexander, Tony, and Mimi, and I had the great honor of speaking with Mimi last week. She also leaves behind five grandchildren, Jennifer, Alexander, Tyler, Cristina, and Massimo.

She also left many other friends and family both here in New Jersey and back in Cuba and around the world, but I was speaking with Mimi, this is one of these families, the Vega family, not only did they lose Mirba, but they were crushed with overwhelming loss. Mimi said she lost her mom, obviously, Mirba, her uncle and two cousins, one in Jersey and one in Cuba. We thank Mirba for enriching our state, and we hope she found her American dream right here in New Jersey. May God bless and watch over her and the family she leaves behind, and may God bless and watch over all we have lost over the past 21 months.

Now, let's give a well-deserved shout-out to one of the businesses who were among the first to partner with the Department of Labor through our Return & Earn employment incentive program, Jackson-based Rooster's Roundup provides individualized child daycare to match every client's needs and foster their social and educational growth. Over the past year, Rooster's Roundup grew considerably including from the purchase of a Seaside Heights daycare center that broadened their reach. Administrator, Tiffany Calgeris, knew Rooster's Roundup would need to bring on five new staff members to meet the needs of both patients and kids, and through the Return & Earn incentive program, she was able to not only receive the funds necessary to hire and train these new childcare professionals, but each of the new hires received a \$500 signing bonus. I caught up with Tiffany last week to thank her for being an example of how Return & Earn can help us on the road back, and I know that kids throughout Ocean County are in good hands. When I asked Tiffany what she thought of Return & Earn – and I'm quoting her – she said, "It was a breath of fresh air." Check out Rooster's Roundup. You can find them on Facebook.

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**Department of Health Commissioner Judith Persichilli:** to administer more boosters and pediatric vaccinations. As of today, 19.2% or about 145,000 children between the ages of 5 and 11 have received their initial dose of pediatric Pfizer vaccine. Among the 12 to 17 age group, 387,849 young people between the

ages of 12 and 17 have completed their primary series representing 57% of the New Jersey population in that age group. 443,521 young people between the ages of 12 and 17 received at least one dose of their primary series representing 65% of the New Jersey population in this age group.

As the holidays approach, the best thing we can do to protect ourselves, our families, and our communities is to get a booster shot. As of today, 34% of the 4.5 million eligible residents have been administered a booster shot. We are averaging about 35,000 booster doses each day, but we need to do better. One week from today marks the anniversary of the first COVID-19 vaccination in New Jersey. To commemorate the vaccination journey that we have been on for the past year, administering 14.2 million doses of vaccine, we want to have a special push on boosters with a Boost NJ day on Wednesday, December 15th. We want to boost as many people as possible on Boost NJ day with hopefully every vaccination site in the state hosting a walk-in booster clinic on December 15th. Walk-in availability and extended hours are important to make access to the boosters as easy as possible.

We will provide more detail in the coming week, and we'll work to post a list of these special clinics on [covid19.nj.gov](https://www.covid19.nj.gov). Governor Murphy and I will send a letter today to all vaccination sites inviting them to participate in hosting special walk-in vaccination events next Wednesday, December 15th. It is our hope that every vaccination site in the state will set up a Boost NJ vaccination event. Currently there are two megasites open, the Gloucester County Public Works in Clayton and the Burlington County Vaccination Site in Mount Laurel. A third site will open soon in Somerset County.

On to my daily report, as the Governor shared, our hospitals are seeing increasing hospitalizations up to 1,409 today. This number has been increasing. Since the last briefing there have been two additional reports of multi-system inflammatory syndrome in children. There are now 151 cumulative cases in the state, and one of these children is currently hospitalized. At the state veterans' homes since our last briefing, there are no new cases among residents, and at the psychiatric hospitals, we have four new cases among patients at the hospitals including two at Ann Klein, one in Trenton, and one at Greystone. The daily percent positivity as of December 4th for the state is 9.60%. The northern part of the state reports 8.38%, the central part of the state 10.57%, and the southern part of the state 11.29%. That concludes my daily report. Please continue to stay safe, get boosted, protect yourselves, your family, your friends, and our children. Thank you.

**Governor Phil Murphy:** Judy, thank you. I think whether it's Boost NJ day or even beyond that, I think folks should expect to see us putting even more of our shoulder to the wheel here in terms of public awareness to get everybody as soon as possible boosted, so thank you, Judy, for all as well as for the remarks today. Pat, we had some outages I know from high winds yesterday. We may have some snow tonight. Those items or others that you've got. Great to have you. Take it away.

**State Police Superintendent Col. Pat Callahan:** Thanks, Governor. Good afternoon. Yes, President Fiordaliso and I were in contact yesterday. I think the high yesterday because of the wind was just over 3200 outages. As of just before this press conference, we were down to 80, so trending in a good direction. We are expecting some light flurries tonight. I don't think we're going to see that much accumulation, whether that's in the northwestern part or the very southern part of the state, and I'm also happy to report the warming trend for the weekend. It looks like we're going to be in the mid-60s or so. It might be a little bit wet, but it'll be ideal weather for us hosting the Army Navy game at MetLife stadium, which is a special honor given that it's our 100th anniversary, and our first colonel, Colonel Schwarzkopf, graduated from West Point in 1917. Had the honor of placing a wreath on his grave on Friday, and he's just a few short rows away from General Stormin' Norman so just looking forward to a special weekend, Governor, and that's all I have.

**Governor Phil Murphy:** I will be with you on Saturday at MetLife. It's also not only honoring the state police's 100th, it's the 20th anniversary this year as we know of 9/11, and that was also a driving reason to get it – to have the game played at MetLife and in New Jersey, the greater New York area. Pat, thank you for all of that. As I mentioned a few minutes ago, unless you hear otherwise, we will be with you back in Trenton live and in person on Monday we will be with you, as I say live and not virtually then. With that, I think we'll take a few questions if it's okay with folks.

#### Q&A Session

Michelle, can you help us key up?

**Michelle:** Of course. We will start with Matt Arco.

**Governor Phil Murphy:** Hey, Matt.

**Matt Arco, NJ.com:** Good afternoon, Governor. Actually, my question today is for the colonel. Colonel, do you know why did the state police let lawmakers into the statehouse after you said they wouldn't be allowed entry last week if they didn't show vaccination or a negative test, and also, I'd be remiss – last month was the two-year anniversary of a protest were actually get dragged out of the statehouse by state police. How is this protest any different, even though it is lawmakers?

**Governor Phil Murphy:** I'm going to jump in front of Pat on this one, Matt, and he can come in and add color. Security is something that is – it's not something that we discuss as a general matter, and that includes in this case. I will say that we have the best state police in the entire United States of America, but the big story from last week is not about security. It's about the idiocy of these ringleaders who are putting their fellow members' health and the family – families of those fellow members at risk. This is not about freedom or civil rights. It's about their willingness to volitionally run the risk of infecting innocent law-abiding folks who have done the right thing during this pandemic. It is outrageous, absolutely outrageous, incredibly irresponsible, unforgivable. That's the story from last week. Thank you, Matt. Michelle?

**Michelle:** Great. Our next question will come from Julie Daurio.

**Governor Phil Murphy:** Sorry. Who?

**Michelle:** Julie Daurio.

**Governor Phil Murphy:** Hi, Julie.

**Julie Daurio, NJ Spotlight:** Thank you, Governor. Can you hear me?

**Governor Phil Murphy:** I can.

**Julie Daurio, NJ Spotlight:** Alright, Governor, we have a couple of questions from the NJ Spotlight newsroom for you today. First for yourself and for commissioner Persichilli, with another COVID surge apparently building, hospital executives say they're deeply concerned about staff shortages. They say they're losing people to temp agencies that offer higher salaries and that hospitals often end up competing against each other and paying more to hire those same staffers back. What are your concerns about this, and should this be regulated? The number of school closings and students quarantining due to COVID is rising. What's your reaction, and will you mandate COVID vaccines for students? Why is there still no corrections ombudsperson, and are you concerned that the office can't fully investigate complaints at state prisons without one? Finally, undocumented workers say they face barriers when applying to the Excluded New Jerseyans Fund. What steps is your office taking to make the application process smoother? Thank you.

**Governor Phil Murphy:** Thank you. Pat, I realize I didn't ask you to weigh in on Matt's question, but I assume you're of a like mind, so let me go back to you. I apologize.

**State Police Superintendent Col. Pat Callahan:** I would just say to Matt and everybody that we take that security of that statehouse complex extremely seriously, and we'll certainly continue to do so, Governor. Thank you.

**Governor Phil Murphy:** Amen. Julie, I'll go through and give you some thoughts and then maybe ask Judy to come in particularly on your first and second questions. That is a concern. We're hearing it from the hospitals ourselves, and by the way, this is in the context of a broader labor market shortage, so you've got a mismatch between openings and folks who are able and willing to work, and then in healthcare, you add to the fact that it's 21, 22 going on 22 months of just incredibly hard realities for these people, which makes the folks who are unvaccinated getting sick and willfully ignoring the science and going into these hospitals and adding to their burden even more unacceptable.

Even though we keep all of them in our prayers, they are adding to the problem, not deleting it. I'm not sure regulation is the way forward, but doing everything we can on the one hand to break the back of this pandemic and get some breathing room and everybody doing the responsible thing and on the other hand doing the stuff that a lot of other employers are doing, which is ending up paying more money, increased

benefits, trying to figure out conditions that are – that make the positions as attractive as possible. We have extraordinary hospitals in this state. I was on with the CEOs with Judy last week basically thanking them for their efforts, but it continues to be a tough challenge.

On schools, we owe you an update on schools, and Dan Bryan, I realize we didn't hit that in our presentation today, so I want to make sure we do that on Monday. We still that trend of both folks who are getting infected through in-school transmission but also more frequently infection that is coming from outside. You never take anything off the table, but there are no plans as we sit here today to mandate vaccines in our kids.

Ombudsman, listen, that's something that we take very seriously. We happen to have an outstanding acting commissioner, Victoria Kuhn, at the Department of Corrections, and she's doing an outstanding job in very difficult circumstances, and obviously, these are positions that we want to fill, and we will fill, but we're blessed with an outstanding leader there right now.

I think I've addressed the application process. We're doing everything we can to make it more accessible, including not in the English language, because we want to put that money to work. This is money that we scrounged to find, and we're committed to putting it to work, and we will put it to work. A lot of these programs early on you have some teething issues, but God willing, they'll get smoothed out, and we want to be unequivocal to the folks who have been excluded for whatever reason that these monies are there for them and that they should apply for them. Judy, back up on particularly staffing at hospitals and any observations on school cases and trends there.

**Department of Health Commissioner Judith Persichilli:** Obviously, I'm pretty close to the issue of staffing in hospitals. I've had a number of conversations with the CEOs, both as a group and individually. We characterize it in three buckets. The first is burned out, those that have worked over the last 22 months up front taking care of patients that are suffering from COVID at the worst of the surges that we've had, particularly the first surge, and seeing their friends and colleagues also fall sick and some of them dying as a result. The nurses are tired, and they're burned out.

The next category is aged out. There are a number of individuals, nurses that have worked a really long time in our hospitals that were either at retirement or close to retirement, and those close to retirement because of the circumstances that they've worked through decided to retire, so burned out and aged out, and the item that you're talking about is what we call bought out. In other words, very attractive packages from staffing agencies for individuals to leave the employ of a hospital and work as an agency nurse or sometimes depending on where they're working a traveling nurse. That's a difficult circumstance because in some cases they're not only bought out, they're then sold back to the hospitals that they had just left. That's a situation that it's really somewhat out of our control.

What is within our control is working with the hospitals to develop operating models and economic models that support nurses staying within the confines of a hospital and really promoting more individuals entering the profession. I'm pleased to report that enrollees in nursing programs are definitely up. They are the heroes or one of the many heroes but they are heroes through this pandemic and is being recognized as such. Young individuals want to follow in their footsteps. We have a number of things that we're working on, but it is a very difficult situation.

We're going to pivot to cases in schools. We do know as transmission increases in our communities, those that are unvaccinated, as the Governor has pointed out, put everyone at risk, and that includes children who cannot be vaccinated. Those that can be vaccinated should be vaccinated. The vaccines are safe and effective. Hundreds of thousands of kids have received the vaccines and have done very, very well. We need to protect them so that those that cannot get vaccinated right now are also protected. In times of high transmissibility and high cases, it is going to flow over into our schools, and that's what we're seeing now. I can only suggest if you want to protect our children, get yourself vaccinated.

**Governor Phil Murphy:** Amen. Hey, Judy, may I say one other thing on staffing? I don't want to keep beating this one to death here, but we are a quintessential proud union state, and among other benefits of unions is they look after each other. They look after the brother and sister members. You look at, for instance, a nursing community in our state, which is overwhelmingly organized, that's a good thing in times like this. That's an asset that we've been able to lean on; we've got outstanding leaders of the union. Thank you for that.

Michelle, what do we got?

**Michelle:** Brian Thompson.

**Governor Phil Murphy:** Brian, how are you?

**Brian Thompson, NBC 4 New York:** I'm good, Governor. I trust you are doing well also.

**Governor Phil Murphy:** Yes, I am, sir. Good to hear from you.

**Brian Thompson, NBC 4 New York:** Thank you. As far as the school situation, we're seeing some schools actually shut down for a period of time, a week or ten days. Some parents are actually opposed to that idea. In this case, if it is the unvaccinated, you're penalizing the vaccinated kids. Would you recommend schools go about doing it a different way, perhaps?

**Governor Phil Murphy:** Is that it?

**Brian Thompson, NBC 4 New York:** I had one other question, actually, and that is California's governor has suggested that his state could become a sanctuary for performing abortions and that they would spend budget money to fly people from states that have very strict abortion laws post the Mississippi decision to California. Would New Jersey consider anything like that?

**Governor Phil Murphy:** Yeah, on the latter, that's the first – I had missed that coming out of California. What we're focused on right now, Brian, overwhelmingly, is to codify in state law women's reproductive freedoms in New Jersey and right now, as you – as everyone I think now knows, it's – women have reproductive freedom, but it's entirely based on case law. All of that is, in turn, based on federal law, Roe v. Wade, which is based on – thank you.

Michelle, take a couple more here if we can.

**Michelle:** Next one is Mike Catalini.

**Governor Phil Murphy:** Hey, Mike.

**Mike Catalini, Associated Press:** Hi, Governor. Thanks for doing this. Question for you: I see that New York and Minnesota are calling up the National Guard to deal with staff shortages in nursing homes I believe stemming from COVID. Is that something that New Jersey – that you're looking at for New Jersey? Is that on your radar at all? A question for you Colonel: I'm just curious what your reaction to last week was. It's quite a scene in the State House, hadn't seen anything like that before. I know that there was another voting session on the 16<sup>th</sup> of this month. Can you say how the requirement in the State House will be enforced? Will lawmakers potentially be arrested, or is that something you could take off the table? Just curious how things'll be different in the next voting session if you could talk about that at all, so thank you.

**Governor Phil Murphy:** Thank you, Mike. Don't be mad at the Colonel and me, but we've said what we're going to say about security. I do want to underscore the absolute irresponsibility of those folks who are willfully putting other innocent members and their families house at risk. It is completely and entirely irresponsible, unacceptable.

Nothing's ever off the table, Mike, to your first question. At the moment, at least, that's not something we believe we need to do, but we leave all options on the table. I thought Judy went through a tour de force there of the staffing challenges. I know she was speaking to hospitals. I suspect you could say a lot of what she said, if not all of it as it relates to long-term care facilities as well, but that's – the National Guard option is certainly – they've been extraordinary these past 22 months in a variety of different ways, everything from voting to mega-sites, testing to vaccinations, and everything in between. That's an option you'd always want to keep on the table but nothing – no plans at the moment. Thank you.

Michelle?

**Michelle:** Next we'll go to Joey Fox.

**Governor Phil Murphy:** Hello, Joey.

**Joey Fox, New Jersey Globe:** Good afternoon, Governor. So first, I've got one further follow-up question for Colonel Callahan. This is on a slightly different topic but about – still about the vaccine mandate. There have been reports that some state troopers were reassigned following last Thursday. Can you elaborate on that at all? How many troopers were reassigned? Were any of those reassignments already scheduled or was it because of the event of last Thursday? Then for Governor Murphy, I've got a few voting-related questions. One, so there's a school district referendum that happened last month in Hunterdon County that's separated by only two votes and may go to a recount, but your Administration is opposing it via a deputy attorney general. Can you explain why your Administration, through this deputy attorney general, is opposing the recount? Run-off elections held yesterday had turnout of around 12%. Do you think the state ought to reexamine these very low turnout run-off and special elections and rework them in some way? Finally, what are the chances of Andrews Vickers long-suffering rank choice voting proposal becoming law? Thank you.

**Governor Phil Murphy:** Joey, I'm going to disappoint you, as well. Nothing else to add on State House security, but thank you for asking. The school recount I'm not familiar with but that's a question for the AG. Maybe Dan Bryant, can you connect Joey to somebody in that neck of the woods?

No specific step reaction to run-off elections that had 12% participation, but that level of participation is unacceptably low, so count me in for any creative ideas that we get participation up again without any regard to who you vote for but with a lot of regard to the – whether you vote at all. That's why we did early in-person voting. I don't care, again, who you're voting for but we want to find more ways to make it easier to vote. Nothing new on rank choice on voting. One thing going back, Pat Callahan reminds me on National Guard, I should say that they have been – DMAVA has been and continues to be very helpful at the – to some extent at vet homes and elsewhere. There is some presence that exists already. I was answering it more in the context are you thinking about taking an uptick in the daily drumbeat great work that they've already been doing, so I want to make sure I say that. Again, they are largely, if not entirely, Pat, I think in the DMAVA homes themselves and not in the broader long-term care community.

Maybe we'll do a couple more, Michelle. Is that okay?

**Michelle:** Great. Next we'll go to Shlomo Schorr.

**Governor Phil Murphy:** Hello. Shlomo.

**Shlomo Schorr, Lakewood Shopper:** Hi, Governor. Thank you very much. I just had one quick question for the Health Commissioner. We're now approaching the year anniversary or so of the first COVID shots. Are we getting clearer on the effectiveness of the immunity and is it waning? Related to that with the COVID vaccine numbers on the dashboard I think originally intended to signal where we are in terms of the herd immunity. Will those numbers be revised downward as we move onto the boosters and limited effectiveness of the original shot? Thank you.

**Governor Phil Murphy:** Shlomo – Judy, tell me if you agree with this thought. Can you address that second part, which is really a CDC decision in terms of what constitutes fully vaxxed? I've been trying to get – as I know you have Ed Lifshitz to come in from the bullpen in this – the first question Shlomo asks, it's probably an ideal one and that is observations on effectiveness, efficacy, waning immunity, etc., of the vaccines. Am I right, Judy, to say that the discussion or decision as to whether somebody's fully vaxxed, that's a decision that's a federal one that lies with the CDC?

**Department of Health Commissioner Judith Persichilli:** Correct.

**Governor Phil Murphy:** Are you okay if we pull that in from the bullpen on the first part? Ed, even though there's a lockout of the players, we've found a loophole and we got you in the game.

**Department of Health Medical Advisor Dr. Ed Lifshitz:** Thank you. I'll try not to throw a wild pitch. Let me start out by saying very clearly without a doubt, vaccines continue to be the single best protection we have against this disease and I strongly encourage everybody to go out and get them. What we're talking about with vaccines over time is kind of two different things. One is its effectiveness over the Delta variant, which is still – the very large majority of all cases in New Jersey are still related to the Delta variant. We have seen over time somewhat that the vaccine effectiveness has waned somewhat, particularly against the more milder disease but somewhat against the more serious diseases as well. That's why CDC came out and we're

strongly supporting and telling people to go out and get those boosted and we are now recommending that all people who are eligible, essentially everybody over the age of 18, should go ahead and get that third dose, that booster dose, of the vaccine. We do believe that that will bring it back up to where it had been.

The second is what's in the news a whole lot recently, which is related to Omicron. Some of the things that were very concerning about Omicron and certainly caught people's attentions including myself is that there are both characteristics in the virus itself and early indications that people becoming infected with this virus had been vaccinated before, meaning that this variant could evade the body's immune system and could make people ill even if they've been vaccinated. That is still concerning to me because I think that clearly – against the vaccine – particularly people got the original two shots, that is the fact that we're seeing more and more around the world that people who've been vaccinated are coming down with the variant while luckily it tends to not be as severe.

Now just today, we do be getting some more information from Pfizer as well as other people as well that very clearly points out two things. One is that against the Omicron variant, the original two doses of the vaccine still seem to work quite well against serious disease, meaning what they saw was a sharp drop-off as far as protecting against getting mild illness but against getting hospitalized or death, it was still quite effective. Even more importantly what they found was that it looks like if you go ahead and you get that third dose, and in this case it was Pfizer but no reason to suspect it wouldn't be with Moderna or anything else, that your antibodies get boosted so high that essentially your levels get back to the protection that you had originally when you got the first two doses back in the Spring. That's my very long answer to come back to this point: vaccines are good. They're our best protection against illness. They're the best protection for ourselves, for our families, for our neighbors, and absolutely encourage people, go ahead and get vaccinated whether it's next Wednesday or any other day. Go ahead and get that booster. Get that third shot.

**Governor Phil Murphy:** Ed, well done, as always. I've gotten the question from a number of folks, is the booster one and done for the rest of my life, or is this going to be an annual thing, or somewhere in between? Judy and Ed, I think is it fair to say no one on the planet earth who knows the answer to that question?

**Department of Health Medical Advisor Dr. Ed Lifshitz:** Certainly nobody in this room and yes, that is definitely true. We are learning more every day. We do not know what variants will be coming down the road. We do not know for sure how long the protection will last. So no, no one knows that answer for sure, and in a few more months we'll see. There's a pretty good chance we'll end up needing to take something at least on an annual basis, let's say, but no, that is not known yet.

**Governor Phil Murphy:** Right, thank you for that. Judy, anything you want to add or you good?

**Department of Health Commissioner Judith Persichilli:** Good.

**Governor Phil Murphy:** Michelle, let's do one more if that's okay.

**Michelle:** Great, then the last question will come from Alex Zdan.

**Governor Phil Murphy:** Hello, Alex.

**Alex Zdan, News 12 New Jersey:** Good afternoon, Governor.

**Governor Phil Murphy:** Good afternoon.

**Alex Zdan, News 12 New Jersey:** For Dr. Lifshitz, can you please tell us how concerned we should be about Omicron? Is it a concern to you and how many cases do we currently have in the state as of right now? For the Governor, I'd like to ask you, did you order state troopers to the doors of the Assembly and Senate last week to enforce the vaccination or test mandate and if so, why? For Colonel Callahan, if state troopers can't arrest lawmakers, why were they there? Were they there as an intimidation tactic? Did the Governor order you to do so?

**Governor Phil Murphy:** Is that it?

**Alex Zdan, News 12 New Jersey:** Yes.

**Governor Phil Murphy:** Thank you, Alex. Neither Pat nor I have anything more to offer on questions two or three, so sorry to disappoint you on that. I guess on the first one, Judy and Ed, there's rightful concern, but this is not – let's avoid hysteria. Let's avoid – the science is incredibly incomplete here. I was on with the White House yesterday, and Tony Fauci said he thought a couple of weeks from now, we'll have a little bit of a better handle on it. I'd say there's sober concern but with a lot of this to be determined. In terms of cases, Judy, am I right in saying we have one confirmed, several that are under review and/or being sequenced? Is that a fair assessment?

**Department of Health Commissioner Judith Persichilli:** Yes, correct. Yeah, three that are under sequencing and one confirmed.

**Governor Phil Murphy:** Do you agree with the sentiment we should be concerned, but let's wait and see the science – how that plays out; there's no need to panic right now? Is that fair to say?

**Department of Health Medical Advisor Dr. Ed Lifshitz:** Absolutely, a hundred percent. You said it, President Biden has said it, and much lesser, I'll say it as well. One of the things with this virus in general, I think we need to learn to live somewhere between complacency and panic, meaning we have a certain percentage of the population who would like to think that everything was over and not need to take any precautions at all, and on the other hand, some people are panicking over every bit of news and worrying about Omicron and everything else. When it comes to Omicron in particular, yes, we do not yet know exactly how bad it will be. I am certainly concerned. I am feeling somewhat better over the last couple days with some of the news from Pfizer and other studies. As you've mentioned, we'll learn a whole lot more in the next two weeks or so.

As far as in general goes, it is to some extent like looking at the weather unless I want to be driving or something. When the weather gets worse, I want to take more precautions. I want to be more careful, and I think that's what we're going to have to be doing with this virus, meaning that there'll be times when there'll be less of it around and we'll be a whole lot freer and a other times where the concern goes up. Even without Omicron, our cases are increasing now. We're going into that holiday season, as been mentioned. People are getting together; it's colder. There'll be more virus spread and that is concerning to me, as well. I'm going to come back and say what everybody else has said and sorry for taking up the time, but vaccinate, common-sense precautions for yourself and your family, wear masks, particularly indoors around people that you don't know their status of, and just take some general precautions.

**Governor Phil Murphy:** Judy, anything you want to add to that?

**Department of Health Commissioner Judith Persichilli:** I think the last part of Ed's response is what we have to hold onto. We know that the non-pharmaceutical interventions, masking, physical distancing, washing your hands – we know that all works. Whether it's Omicron or Delta, we should be instituting the non-pharmaceutical interventions every day.

**Governor Phil Murphy:** It's a good reminder. Alex's question is a good one and it's a good reminder to reiterate something that I think we've said before many times. The expectation – again, it's just expectation, right? The expectation is we will not be managing this pandemic to get to caseloads of zero. It's just not the likely outcome. This feels like it's going to be at some level of ebbing and flowing, and I like Ed's weather analogy. There's going to be periods of time when you have to be at a heightened posture. That's just the reality, and I think that's a long-winded way of saying are we concerned? Yes, we would be abrogating our responsibilities if we weren't, but it's a sober, objective assessment based on incomplete data. Let's let this play out and in the meantime, remind everybody that we're not battling right now to the best of our knowledge not one case of Omicron is in a hospital in New Jersey. This is 99.9-plus percent Delta, and that's the task before us.

To each and every one of you, thanks for those good questions. On behalf of Judy, and Pat, and Ed, and Parimal, and Dan, and the rest of the team, we say thank you. Again, we'll be back with you live and in person next Monday at 1 o'clock in Trenton. Please keep up the great work, folks. Do the smart stuff, the basic stuff that we know works, and get vaccinated. If you're vaccinated, get boosted. Thanks, everybody. God bless.

# Governor Phil Murphy

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